DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 308 764 HE 022 733

AUTHOR Kallio, Ruth E.; Spielvogel, Jennifer A.
TITLE A.C.T. Test Score Senders: Real Interest or Keeping Options Open? AIR 1989 Annual Forum Paper.
PUB DATE May 89
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research (29th, Baltimore, MD, April 30-May 3, 1989).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Admission; *College Applicants; *College Choice; Decision Making; Eligibility; Expectation; Higher Education; Institutional Research; Scores; *Standardized Tests; *Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *AIR Forum; American College Testing Program

ABSTRACT

A survey was conducted of a sample of 716 well-qualified students who sent their American College Testing Program (ACT) scores to the University of Michigan but subsequently did not apply for admission. Telephone interviews resulted in 574 completed interviews, for an 80% response rate. The interview instrument elicited information regarding the colleges these students considered, their ratings of these schools relative to an "ideal" college, their sources of information, and the key factors influencing their decisions to send scores and not to apply. The findings suggest that these decisions are a function of the student's level of interest in a college, desire to keep options open, information-gathering activities, and expectations regarding the college's response upon receiving the scores. A model of this stage of the college choice process is proposed. Contains 11 references. (Author/KM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED308764

A.C.T. TEST SCORE SENDERS: REAL INTEREST OR KEEPING OPTIONS OPEN?

Ruth E. Kallio
Associate Director
Office of Academic Planning and Analysis
The University of Michigan
520 E. Liberty
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104-2210
(313) 763-7654

Jennifer A. Spielvogel
Senior Research Associate
Office of Academic Planning and Analysis
The University of Michigan
520 E. Liberty
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104-2210
(313) 763-7654

Paper presented at The Association for Institutional Research
29th Annual Forum
Baltimore, Maryland
May, 1989

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

AIR

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

HE 022 733

AIR
for Management Research, Policy Analysis, and Planning

This paper was presented at the Twenty-Ninth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Omni Inner Harbor Hotel and the Lord Baltimore Hotel, Baltimore, Maryland, April 30 - May 3, 1989. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum Papers.

Teresa Karolewski
Chair and Editor
Forum Publications Editorial
Advisory Committee

ABSTRACT

This is a study of a sample of 716 well-qualified students who sent their ACT test scores to the University of Michigan but subsequently did not apply for admission. The results describe the colleges these students considered, their ratings of these schools relative to an "ideal" college, their sources of information, and the key factors influencing their decisions to send scores and not to apply. The findings suggest that these decisions are a function of the student's level of interest in a college, desire to keep options open, information gathering activities, and expectations regarding the college's response upon receiving the scores. A model of this stage of the college choice process is proposed.

A.C.T. TEST SCORE SENDERS: REAL INTEREST OR KEEPING OPTIONS OPEN

INTRODUCTION

As higher education moves into the 1990's, college and university administrators will face the difficult and complex task of managing enrollments in a time of increasing competition for a declining pool of traditional college age students. This paper concerns one institution's attempt to deal with demographic reality and competitive forces. Projections for the University of Michigan (UM) indicate significant declines in its in-state freshman applicant pool from key feeder counties. UM administrators are concerned about this and would like to develop strategies for improving its market position not only in those feeder counties but throughout the state.

A target population for helping to accomplish this is the approximately 1,700 well-qualified Michigan high school students who send their ACT test scores to the University each year but who do not apply for admission. Since these are students who have demonstrated at least minimal levels of knowledge and interest in the UM and the University is clearly interested in them, it is reasonable to assume that successful recruiting strategies could be developed if more were known about the factors influencing their college choice decision.

Past studies conducted by the UM have focused on the choices and perceptions held by "admitted" freshmen, both those who enrolled at the UM and those who did not. There was little systematic information available, however, on potential students who are lost at an earlier stage of the decision process.

This study was intended to answer several research questions on why and at what point students lose interest in the UM. Are students self-selecting themselves out of the process or are University actions or inactions causing them to not apply? A key question is whether or not these students have a real interest in the

University or whether they are simply sending scores in order to keep their options open at an institution which, for them, is no more than a backup choice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The college selection process is one in which the pool of potential matriculants and the options available to each student are narrowed through a series of decision stages (Kotler, 1976; Litten et al., 1983). Models of the choice process identify the following sequential decisions on the part of the student: 1) to attend college; 2) to start the college choice process; 3) to gather information; 4) to apply; and 5) to enroll. Most of the research cited in the literature focuses on only three of these stages: to attend, to apply, and to enroll. Less in known about what happens between the decision to attend and the decision to apply, the "search" stage (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987), the point at which interest is lost among students in this study's population. An interesting research question which results is twofold: do the decision to submit scores and the decision to not apply occur before or after gathering information on the particular institution?

Although no studies were found of the population segment this research concerns, other relevant literature suggests that the college choice process is influenced by student preferences interacting with their images and perceptions of various college attributes (Kuntz, 1987; Maguire and Lay, 1981; Rowse and Wing, 1982). Preferences are affected by what students perceive as possible. Images and perceptions are influenced by sources of information (Eberly et al., 1987) and may or may not be based on fact (Smith, 1988). Personal characteristics of the student such as academic ability, socioeconomic status, and race have also been shown to influence the choice process (Chapman and Jackson, 1987; Hearn, 1985). The interactions of various effects often lead to self-selection behavior in which the student narrows options (Lay et al., 1982).

METHODOLOGY

Population and Sample

The population for this study was the nearly 1700 high ability Michigan high school students who had their ACT test scores sent to the UM, but did not follow up with an admission application for Fall 1988; i.e., they had demonstrated an interest in the UM by sending their test scores, but appeared to have lost interest when it came time to apply. High ability was defined as those students with ACT scores and high school grade point averages (gpa's) that would fully qualify them for admission to the UM. Two sets of test score and gpa criteria were used to determine eligibility for the study, one for whites and Asians and one for underrepresented minorities (Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans).

A representative sample of 806 students was drawn from those who qualified. All underrepresented minorities who met the study criteria, 185 in number, were included in the sample. The other 621 were selected from a combined population of 1508 students who were whites, Asians, and those whose racial status was unknown. As a conservative step to ensure full study coverage of underrepresented minorities, the eligibility of students whose racial status could not be determined was identical to that of the criteria for underrepresented minorities. It was determined later that 90 of these students were in fact whites or Asians. Since they had been included based on the underrepresented minority student criteria, these cases were subsequently deleted from the population and the sample. Thus, the final sample consisted of 716 students.

The Survey Instrument

The basic methodology selected for the study was a telephone interview. Phone interviews were conducted by the Survey Research Center of the University's Institute for Social Research. The survey instrument contained a variety of questions requiring both short, close-ended answers, and lengthier, open-ended

responses. A series of questions asked respondents to identify and compare their top preference institution and the UM against their "ideal" college on several characteristics relating to quality, size, social atmosphere, and academic environment. Those same characteristics were also rated by the respondents as to how important each one was to the respondent in choosing a college. Respondents also were asked to rate various sources of information (parents, friends, guidance counselors, college guides, the media) as to their influence on the student's application decision. Finally, questions specific to the UM's image and performance, and students' experiences with the UM were included. Demographic information such as race, sex, and socioeconomic status were obtained from an ACT-provided data tape and from the survey instrument.

The questionnaire was pre-tested on two different samples of students. Interviews, averaging about 21 minutes in length, were conducted in April and May, 1988, and resulted in 574 completed interviews for an 80% response rate.

The findings which follow are based on a weighted sample in which each response is multiplied by the inverse of the probability of being chosen for the sample. Thus, the responses from whites and Asians are multiplied by a factor of 2.41, and those from underrepresented minorities by a factor of 1.0. The results that are reported and described below are based on a weighted sample of 1,211 students.

Description of the Sample

The survey sample includes 52% male and 48% female respondents with a racial/ethnic background of 85.5% white, 6.9% Black, 2.7% Hispanic, 2.0% Asian, 0.6% Native American, and 2.0% other/unknown. These breakdowns by gender and race are comparable to those of entering freshmen at the University.

Some geographical bias was found in the sample when students were divided into geographical regions based on county of residence in Michigan. Only one-third of all respondents (34%) were from the Greater Detroit region, which consists of

Oakland, Macomb, and Wayne counties. This is an underrepresentation in the sample since about 50% of UM admitted freshmen who are Michigan residents come from these three counties. This reflects a regional bias within the State in terms of college entrance examination the students choose to take (ACT vs. SAT).

Parental income information was also available, with distributions as follows: income less than $24,000 (18.5%); $24,000-$41,999 (35.9%); $42,000-$59,999 (30.0%); and 15.6% with an income greater than $60,000. When compared to data from other sources, the sample appears to include more lower income students than is true for the University's undergraduate population. This is perhaps related to the geographic bias in the sample as well.

Nearly 90% (87.9%) of the students in the sample have had other family members attend college. One-fifth of them said that a family member had attended the University of Michigan. This figure indicates a looser alumni tie for the sample than is true for recent classes of admitted in-state freshmen, in which one-third of the students have had family members attend the UM.

FINDINGS

The College Choice Process

A major intent of this study was to find out more about the students' college choice process. At the time of the survey, our population of students was approaching the final decision in the college choice process model: where to enroll. Survey results indicate, however, that these respondents, on average, had begun to narrow their choices rather early in the decision process. The fact that ACT scores were sent to an average of only 3 schools suggests that they had already developed a short list of potential institutions to attend. Their lists were narrowed further in the next stage, with applications for admissions being sent to just 2.2 colleges and universities. Over a third (37%) of the students reported that they had applied to only one institution.

A key research question in this study is whether students who send their test scores have any real intent to apply to the UM, or are they simply filling in a blank on the ACT test form, the cost of which allows them to send their scores to up to three schools? Students were therefore asked in the interview why they sent their ACT scores to the UM. The most frequent response (64%) was, "I was planning to apply". This indicates at least some minimal intent to apply on the part of many students. Responses to other questions in the survey provide clues as to why that intent was not acted upon by the student.

Other reasons cited for having scores sent include the quality and reputation of the UM, its location, and the advice of parents, teachers, or friends. Several students expected some action from the UM as a result of sending their test scores, as they replied that they hoped to get information or a scholarship from the UM, or wanted to see if they'd be admitted. This expectation is not unrealistic since many institutions do send students recruitment literature as well as offers of admission and financial aid upon receipt of test scores. The UM practice is to send recruitment literature when test scores are received during certain times of year; thus some students, but not others, would have their expectations fulfilled in terms of a response on the part of the University.

The Top Preferences

Students were asked to name their top three choices of the schools to which they applied and were then asked several questions about those three institutions. For many students the college choice process involves visiting the campus as a way of gathering information about an institution. In relation to their top three preferences, the students were asked whether they had visited the campus. Over three quarters of the students (76%) visited their first preference institution, while 59% and 55% visited their second and third choices, respectively.

Questions regarding their admission and financial aid award status at their

top three preferences were also asked. Survey results suggest that early notification of admission perhaps is related to an institution being considered one's "top preference". At the time of the survey, 93% of the respondents had been admitted to their first choice institution, while 84% had been admitted to their second choice, and 85% were admitted to their third preference.

Table 1 indicates that institutions in the State of Michigan dominated all three preferences of our survey sample. Of those choosing a Michigan public university, Michigan State University was listed by half of the respondents, with the remainder's choices distributed over 12 of the other 14 Michigan publics. The similarity in the percentage distributions across the three choices suggests that students were quite consistent in terms of the type of institution they preferred.

TABLE 1. Preferred Institutions By Type

	Top Choice (n=1209)	2nd Choice (n=759)	3rd Choice (n=412)
MICHIGAN			
4-year Public	62%	58%	54%
2-year	2%	3%	1%
Private	16%	14%	14%
Subtotal	80%	75%	69%
OUT-of-STATE			
Public	7%	9%	12%
Private	12%	15%	18%
Subtotal	19%	24%	30%
TOTAL*	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**

***Figures may not add to the total due to rounding.**

There was a great deal of variety in the out-of-state schools in which the respondents expressed interest. Nearly 150 public and private institutions were listed among the students' preferences, with most schools (82%) having been mentioned by five or fewer respondents. In general, those most frequently mentioned were major public and private schools in neighboring states.

The list of preferred institutions of underrepresented minority students is

somewhat different from that of whites and Asians. While the predominant choice of all respondents regardless of race is a Michigan public university, racial differences appear when the top choice is another type of college. Underrepresented minorities are less likely than other students to consider a Michigan private college and more likely to consider an out-of-state school, including a number of the historically Black institutions.

A somewhat different question from the preference ones was also asked of the respondents in regard to college choice. It read, "You've told me which college you would prefer to attend, now please tell me which one you are most likely to attend." The purpose of this question was to see if there was congruence between the students' "ideal" and "real" choices. The data suggest a great deal of overlap. There were only slight variations (less than 2%) in the "most likely to attend" responses from the "first preference" ones, with the differences favoring the Michigan public institutions.

How Students Perceive The University of Michigan

A key component of the survey instrument was a series of questions intended to capture students' perceptions of the UM in comparison to their first preference college. Students were given seventeen institutional characteristics and asked to rate, on a scale of 1-100, their first preference institution and the UM against an "ideal college" which, for them, would always rate 100 on every characteristic.

In terms of overall ratings (Table 2), the UM had higher ratings than the preferred school on only 6 of the 17 characteristics. These include: value of an undergraduate degree, variety of academic majors, academic quality, competitiveness among students, special academic programs, and diversity among students. These characteristics relate primarily to two aspects of the University: quality and diversity (a positive attribute derived from large size).

Although the preferred school was rated higher than the University on a

majority of characteristics, the six characteristics where there was the greatest difference include: interest in you as a person, faculty-student interaction, size of student body, average class size, attractiveness of campus, and emphasis on undergraduate education. These characteristics all clearly relate to the common perception of the UM as a large and impersonal school where the education of undergraduates is a low priority.

TABLE 2. Students' Ratings of 17 Institutional Characteristics First Preference Institution vs. The University of Michigan

Institutional Characteristic	UM Mean*	1st Preference Mean*
Value of an undergraduate degree	92.5	87.1
Variety of academic majors	92.4	85.2
Academic quality	91.8	87.8
Competitiveness among students	89.3	83.7
Special academic programs	88.0	84.7
Diversity among students	85.5	81.9
Academic assistance programs	83.7	85.3
Quality of life for minorities	83.1	86.3
Emphasis on undergraduate education	82.3	87.6
Sensitivity to minorities	81.0	85.6
Attractiveness of campus	79.2	85.2
Distance from home	76.5	78.8
Cost of attending	75.4	80.2
Size of student body	74.4	86.4
Faculty-student interaction	74.0	87.5
Average class size	72.6	84.6
Interest in you as a person	70.8	88.0

*T-test significant at $p < 0.01$ for all characteristics.

It should be noted that when the UM rated higher it did so by only a margin of 3-7 points on a 100 point scale. On the other hand, when it rated lower, the margin of difference was often 10 or more points. Thus, the distance in the ratings between the UM and its competing schools is much larger when the UM is compared unfavorably than when it is compared favorably. This suggests that these students overall had a much greater negative perception of the University than a positive one based on the number of items on which the UM was down-rated and the degree to which the ratings were lower.

In order to put the ratings of the 17 characteristics into a decision context,

respondents were asked to rate on a 1-4 scale, where 1=extremely important and 4=not too important, how important each was to them in choosing an institution. Table 3 indicates that the characteristic ranking highest in overall importance was academic quality, followed by the value of an undergraduate degree, two characteristics on which the respondents rated the UM closer to their ideal than their top choice institution. However, the next three characteristics in the rankings, interest in you as a person, emphasis on undergraduate education, and faculty-student interaction, are all items on which the UM was rated considerably lower than the competing schools. The variety of academic majors, one of the UM's strongest attributes according to respondent ratings, was considered by students to be a rather important decision factor, ranking 6th. Other characteristics on which the UM rated well in terms of perceptions of the ideal were not as important to the students when choosing an institution. Special academic programs ranked 8th, competitiveness among students ranked 14th in importance, and diversity among students ranked 15th.

TABLE 3. Mean Ratings Of Institutional Characteristics' Importance

Rank		Mean Rating
1	Academic Quality	1.40
2	Value of an undergraduate degree	1.65
3	Interest in you as a person	1.67
4	Emphasis on undergraduate education	1.78
5	Faculty-student interaction	1.80
6	Variety of academic majors	1.93
7	Cost of attending	2.02
8	Special academic programs	2.12
9	Academic assistance programs	2.25
10	Average class size	2.27
11	Size of student body	2.36
12	Sensitivity to minorities	2.47
13	Quality of life for minorities	2.53
14	Competitiveness among students	2.55
15	Diversity among students	2.60
16	Distance from home	2.70
17	Attractiveness of campus	2.77

Factors Influencing Decisions About Applying

In an attempt to understand what factors influenced students' decisions about applying to the UM, students were asked the open-ended question, "Is there anything about the UM that causes you concern such as its public image, reputation, or other characteristics?" Over half of the respondents (52%) reported that they did have concerns, and provided a total of 1104 responses (many respondents identified more than one concern). The major areas of concern identified by students were the size of the UM (23% of all responses) and the University's image or atmosphere (also 23%). Typical comments regarding size included "classes are too large" and "UM campus is too spread out". The University's image was criticized in such comments as "too competitive", "too liberal", and "too impersonal". Other concerns mentioned included racism (11%), the cost of attending (10%), and physical characteristics and location of the UM (10%).

Information supplied by various sources could have influenced students' decisions about applying to the UM and were probed in the survey. Nearly two-thirds of the students had had contact with a UM representative in a formal presentation or meeting in their community. Thirty-eight percent (38%) of these students said that the meeting made them more likely to apply to the UM, 13% were less likely to apply, and 49% were not influenced either way. That nearly half of the respondents replied that the presentations had no effect on their decision suggests that perhaps other sources of information were more influential.

Parents, relatives, teachers, or friends appear to have played a major communications role. Fifty-two percent of the students reported that the information they received from these sources influenced their decision about applying. A tally of the responses indicates that about 37% of the students were encouraged to apply by these people who provided comments relating to their personal experiences at the UM, or general statements about the quality and prestige

of the University. Over half (52%) of the respondents who were influenced by these individuals, however, heard negative statements relating to the cost, size, and competitive atmosphere of the UM. Less influential in the college application decision were high school counselors, published college guides, and the media.

More direct questions were asked about the cost of the UM as an influencing factor. Just slightly over half of the respondents (55%) said that the cost of attending did not influence their decision about applying, while 45% said it did. Because perceptions of cost can be affected by perceptions of the availability of financial aid, students were asked a few questions regarding their eligibility for aid. A majority of the respondents (61%) did not think they would have qualified for financial aid at the UM had they applied for it. Of particular interest here is the fact that this perception of non-eligibility was not limited to students from higher income families only. Analysis found that almost 30% of the respondents from families with incomes less than $24,000 per year and almost 50% of those from families in the $24,000-$41,999 range assumed they would not have qualified for aid. Looking at the data by race, 66% of the underrepresented minority students expected to qualify for financial aid as opposed to only 34% of the white and Asian students.

It is also important to know the perception students have as to their chances of being admitted to the UM. Do students self-select out because they assume they would not be admitted? The data indicate that that is generally not the case. Over 90% of the white and Asian students and more than three-fourths (78%) of the underrepresented minority students thought they would have been admitted had they applied.

Visits to The University of Michigan

Many students were able to become familiar with the UM through personal experience here. A total of 60% of the students in the study have visited the UM campus in the last three years. As expected, a high proportion of these students

(85%) are from southeast Michigan/Greater Detroit, an area within a 50-mile radius of the UM campus. In general the greater the distance from campus, the less likely students were to have visited. By race, significantly more minority students (70%) have been to the UM than majority students (57%).

What Could The University of Michigan Have Done?

Near the end of the interview, after the respondents had discussed a variety of issues related to the UM, one final question was asked regarding their non-application to the University. A very direct question, it read, "Is there anything else the UM could have done which would have made you more likely to apply for admission?" Most of the students apparently had decided that the UM was not the university for them, as nearly two-thirds (65%) of the students responded that there was nothing the UM could have done. The other third (35%) who said "yes", however, mentioned several approaches the UM could have taken to encourage them to apply.

Almost half (47%) of the comments related to the University's recruitment and other information-providing efforts. Several students mentioned that they would like the UM to send them more information and literature about admissions and financial aid. Other students suggested that the University should take a more personal approach when recruiting students.

Nearly 20% (18.5%) of the comments focused on cost and financial aid. Lowering the cost of attending the UM, and giving assurances about sufficient financial aid, were the popular responses in this category.

Other replies indirectly referenced the UM's size. Fourteen percent (14%) of the comments related to the learning environment and included suggestions such as "have more opportunity to interact with professors", "have smaller classes", and "put more emphasis on undergraduate programs".

DISCUSSION

This study poses the following question: Do students who send test scores to a college but do not follow up with an application have a real interest in attending that college or are they simply keeping their college choice options open? Based on the findings of this study, the answer to this question would appear to be "yes". Evidence in support of genuine interest on the part of many students is seen in the fact that 64% "planned to apply" to the UM. Furthermore, most of the students had very positive perceptions of the University on a number of the characteristics that were most important to them in choosing a college. Also, the UM was a realistic choice for the majority of students since they were considering primarily instate schools rather than out-of-state schools.

Evidence to support the idea that a number of students were just keeping their options open is not insubstantial. These students appear to have narrowed their interests and options early in the college choice decision process. The many negative perceptions of the UM, some on key decision characteristics, also suggests little or no real interest. Perhaps the most telling piece of evidence, however, is the fact that 65% of the respondents said that there was nothing the University could have done to make them more likely to apply.

The mix of evidence suggests that the original question poses a false dichotomy between having a real interest in a college and being concerned solely with keeping one's options open. Most students are motivated by both factors, each of which can be represented as a continuum going from low to high in scale (see Figure 1). In this study, most students probably fall somewhere towards the middle on each continuum -- that is, some genuine interest in the UM as well as some concern for keeping options open.

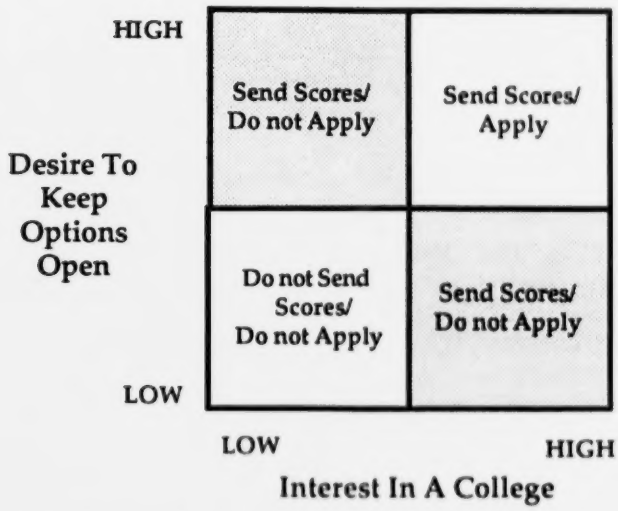

FIG. 1. Student College Choice Actions Based on Interest & Keeping Options Open

Figure 1 illustrates the likely actions of students who fall on different ranges of each scale. As the figure shows, our study focuses on the upper left and lower right quadrants. At one extreme, the upper left corner (high concern for keeping options open, low interest in the college), one finds students who fill in a blank line on their ACT test form because the cost of the test allows them to send scores to up to three schools. The other extreme, the lower right corner (low concern for keeping options open, high interest in the college), is represented by students who claimed throughout the survey that they really wanted to attend the UM but missed the deadline for applying.

While it is not hard to understand or explain why students fail to apply at colleges they are not interested in, it is a more difficult task to understand or explain actions that appear to be inconsistent with stated plans and preferences. An easy answer, of course, is that the human decision process often falls short of perfect rationality and consistency. Without a doubt, there are some students in this sample for whom this is probably the best explanation. There is evidence in this study, however, that something more complex is happening between the decision to

send scores and the decision to apply, and that it is related to actions on the part of both the student and the college.

The collective findings of the study seem to point to three types of students in terms of actions taken following the sending of scores:

1) Proactive students seek out and gather information on the colleges to which they sent scores. This information causes them to revise their assumptions and perceptions regarding a particular school. In the case of the students in this sample, many appear to have acquired more negative than positive information regarding the University which, in turn, caused them to lose interest in it.
2) Reactive students expect and wait for the college to respond with application information, an admissions decision, and/or an offer of financial aid. Lack of action on the part of the college, as was the case here, forces the student to reevaluate his/her assumptions and perceptions of the college, largely in a negative direction, and ultimately to lose interest in applying.
3) Inactive or passive students neither seek out nor receive much additional information. Consequently, they make decisions on whether or not to apply based on assumptions and perceptions formed prior to sending their scores to a college. Because of inaction on the part of the student, incorrect assumptions or misperceptions go untested and unchallenged and the student ends up self-selecting himself/herself out of the choice process. Examples from this study are students who thought they would not have been admitted (even though they were fully qualified) or lower income students who assumed they would not receive financial aid.

This suggests that there is a basic decision flow (see Figure 2) that starts with a student's initial knowledge of a college and interest in attending it that leads to a

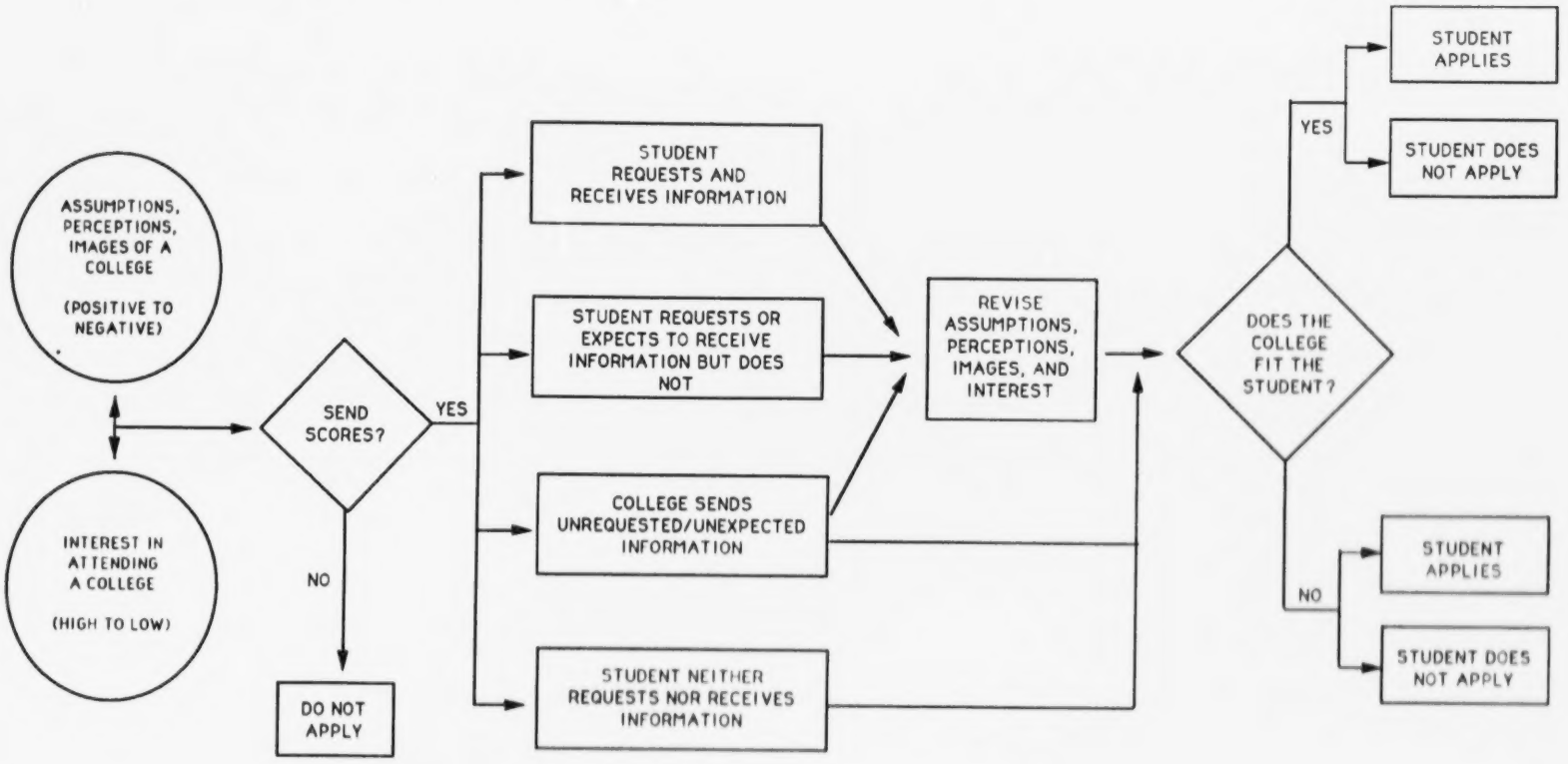

FIG. 2. Applying to College: A Decision Flow Model

decision to send scores. Information gathering and expectations on the part of the student and actions/inactions on the part of the college will cause most students to revise the operative set of assumptions and perceptions that is guiding their decision process. This leads to a consideration of how well the college fits the needs and interests of the student. In general, students will apply to the colleges that they perceive provide the best fit for them. Students will, on occasion, make apparently counter-intuitive decisions for any number of reasons including constraints and circumstances beyond their control, poor judgment, or inertia.

CONCLUSIONS

This study focuses on a population of prospective applicants at a particular stage in the college choice process on which there is little known research. The findings suggest that there are many actions and decisions on the part of students and on the part of colleges that can occur in the relatively short time span between the decision to send scores and the decision to apply. Student choices appear to be related to the degree of interest in a particular college, the desire to keep options open, information gathering activities, contact with the college, and the college's response to that contact.

The practical implication of this study is that some colleges may have a relatively untapped recruiting potential if they have a pool of well-qualified students who send test scores but never apply. The findings suggest that it is essential to supply information to students upon the receipt of scores in order to meet student expectations as well as to begin to counteract erroneous assumptions, inaccurate facts, or misperceptions of the school. Further follow-up with students who had not yet applied would reinforce the college's interest in them and might also prompt to action students who are slow to respond. While every student who sends test scores is not a potential applicant or matriculant, many could be with some focused effort on the part of the college.

REFERENCES

Chapman, R. and Jackson, R. College Choices of Academically Able Students: The Influence of No-Need Financial Aid and Other Factors. New York, NY: College Entrance Examination Board, 1987.

Eberly, C.; Johnson, R.; and Stewart N. Information Sources Used by High School Seniors in Choosing a College. Paper presented at American Association for Counseling and Development, New Orleans, April 1987.

Hearn, J. Who Goes Where? A Study of the Postsecondary Destinations of 1980 High School Graduates. Paper presented at ASHE, Chicago, March 1985.

Hossler, D. and Gallagher, K. Studying Student College Choice: A Three-Phase Model and the Implications for Policymakers. College and University, 62 (1987), 207-221.

Kotler, P. Applying Marketing Theory to College Admissions. In College Entrance Examination Board (Ed.), A Role for Marketing in College Admissions. New York, NY: College Entrance Examination Board, (1976), 54-72.

Kuntz, S. A Study of Students' Cognitive Structure for Colleges. Paper presented at AERA, Washington, DC, April 1987.

Lay, R.; Maguire, J.; and Nolan, C. Assessing Market Potential in the Inquiry Pool. Paper presented at AIR, Denver, May 1982.

Litten, L.; Sullivan, D.; and Brodigan, D. Applying Market Research in College Admissions. New York, NY: College Entrance Examination Board, 1983.

Maguire, J. and Lay, R. Modeling the College Choice Process: Image and Decision. College and University, 56 (Winter 1981), 123-139.

Rowse, G. and Wing, P. Assessing Competitive Structures in Higher Education. Journal of Higher Education, 53 (1982), 656-686.

Smith, K. College Choice and Institutional Image: Fact and Fallacy in the Decisions of Two and Four Year-Students. Paper presented at AIR, Phoenix, May 1988.